
REVIEWS

William Kerrigan. *Shakespeare's Promises* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. 243p.

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William Kerrigan's new book, *Shakespeare's Promises*, examines the promises, vows, oaths, contracts, and/or bargains and the obligations those promises exert upon the dramatic life of Shakespeare's plays. The first chapter, "The Promising Animal," is particularly valuable in its historical discussion of oaths within the context of philosophy and English Civil and Ecclesiastic law. This discussion reminds us of the age in which Shakespeare lived when the government and the church vied for influence through the requirement of loyalty oaths and of the possibility of reprisal against the honor and reputations of oath takers. Here, particularly, Kerrigan offers readers a solid background for the actions of the "promising animal" and provides a basis for influencing critical perceptions of these plays and the act of promising as a contract of ethical behavior. Unfortunately, the long explication chapters that follow are less valuable.

That promising has been dealt with by other authors or that Kerrigan's own philosophy of promising is sketchy — both of which he admits in his preface — or that he has not chosen plays more applicable for a discussion of promises, such as *Measure for Measure* or *Macbeth*, is not *Shakespeare's Promises'* biggest problem. Its problem is that rather than showing how promises "invest [Shakespeare's] dramas with literary structure" and dramatically affect the "motivating, linking, convening, destroying, and fulfilling, [therefore] trying the characters with burdens of obligation" (198), the author deals in general thematic issues instead of the specifics affecting the direction of the plays.

Kerrigan tells us that he purposely concentrated on *Richard III*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello*, because they "exemplify three different genres, take us chronologically from the early Shakespeare to the mature tragic phase, illustrate a progression in Shakespeare's understanding of promising, and ... seem ... among his profoundest explorations on this subject" (xvii). Yet he provides little specific evidence to support the final two claims. For example, Kerrigan points out that Richard presents a "mind split between two attitudes toward broken vows and infirm faith" (62) — a charge that could also be leveled against Shylock or Othello as characters who, on one hand, want to keep their promises but, on the other,

also want to avoid the penalties for knowing duplicity. From this, one would expect a discussion of how the plays' major figures each use promising to manipulate others and that the discussion would point specifically to the issues of reputation, reliability, and veracity. The discussions, however, become long explications that do not involve promising, perhaps in the hope that by explaining the text readers will somehow rely on the pervasiveness of promising in our own culture to understand how promising applies to all Shakespeare plays. Such plot summarizing does not lead us to a fuller understanding of the dual nature of characters who believe in the sanctity of and the grave consequences for violating oaths but, for reasons of ambition or revenge, forswear themselves. Rather it distances the reader from the author's premise that promising is formulaic, aimed at the future, and an attempt to forestall human will by changing behavior.

Kerrigan's investigation of promising in Shakespeare's work is hampered by weaknesses that are acknowledged in the book's preface that the subject is too large and too vaguely defined, that it has been previously addressed by other authors, that it is hampered by issues of case law and legal philosophy, and that it is directed by the author's own unprovable biases. His acknowledgment, however, fails to beguile readers to the point that they will accept his premise that Shakespeare is, more than most playwrights, concerned with the issues of promising or that "promising was particularly fertile for Shakespeare as a course of excellent ironies, some of which turn on the historic shift through which he lived" (198).

While Kerrigan takes pains to point out that Shakespeare lived through a particularly "contractual" age where oaths were enacted by both church and state upon the citizenry — sometimes with conflicting results — he seems to play only lip service to the potential and resonance of such promising. That he really wished to discuss the implications of honorable fulfillment of promises rather than the nature of promises is apparent in his continued return to the ethics of honor and obligation underlying oath taking. However, his early disclaimer that honor is merely a "form of conscience sprung from the seminal seed of promising" undercuts his own premise that Shakespeare was — more than other playwrights — preoccupied "with the creation, and the loss, of ideals" (ix) made through the act of promising. His clumsy handling of the two issues misleads readers who believe that Kerrigan will eventually focus his discussion on the dramatic life that promising enacts upon Shakespeare's characters or upon the eventual success or failure of those characters' manipulations upon others.

One wonders if *Shakespeare's Promises* would have been more promising for the reader if more plays had been discussed rather than focusing on long explications of only three, or whether there are better plays to discuss. Unfortunately, Kerrigan

never really progresses beyond standard explanations of the moral implications of the major characters' actions in the plays under discussion nor tells us why these three plays in particular are Shakespeare's most profound regarding promising. Had Kerrigan paid more attention to his own claim that "promising [turns] on the inevitably divided loyalties of people embedded in marriage, friendship, and business" (202), perhaps his long explications of the plays -- and our further use of his insights -- would have been better served. ✿